You think your life is weird? Welcome to mine!

I, of Newt

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I'M a red-spotted newt — at least, that's what you call me. We newts form a large family of salamanders. Salamanders are amphibians, which means we lead double lives — on land and in water. Welcome to my life.

Like you, I began life as an egg. But your mother carried your egg inside her body for nine months while it developed, and probably looked after you for years after you were born. Maybe she's still mothering you. My mother stuck my egg onto a leaf in a shallow woodland pool and never looked back. Her 200 other eggs were also deposited singly and left to chance.

I developed inside my egg's protective jelly coating for a month before wriggling out into a greatly expanded, watery world. I was a third of an inch long, with feathery gills, tiny buds for front legs (no hind limbs yet) and a finlike tail. I was taught nothing — all I needed to know was genetically programmed. A copepod brushed my gills and I gulped it down — my first meal. Soon I was eating every tiny crustacean, insect or worm I could catch.

But I wasn't the only one hungry. If you think dragonfly naiads, diving beetles and water scorpions aren't scary, you've never seen one 10 times your size!

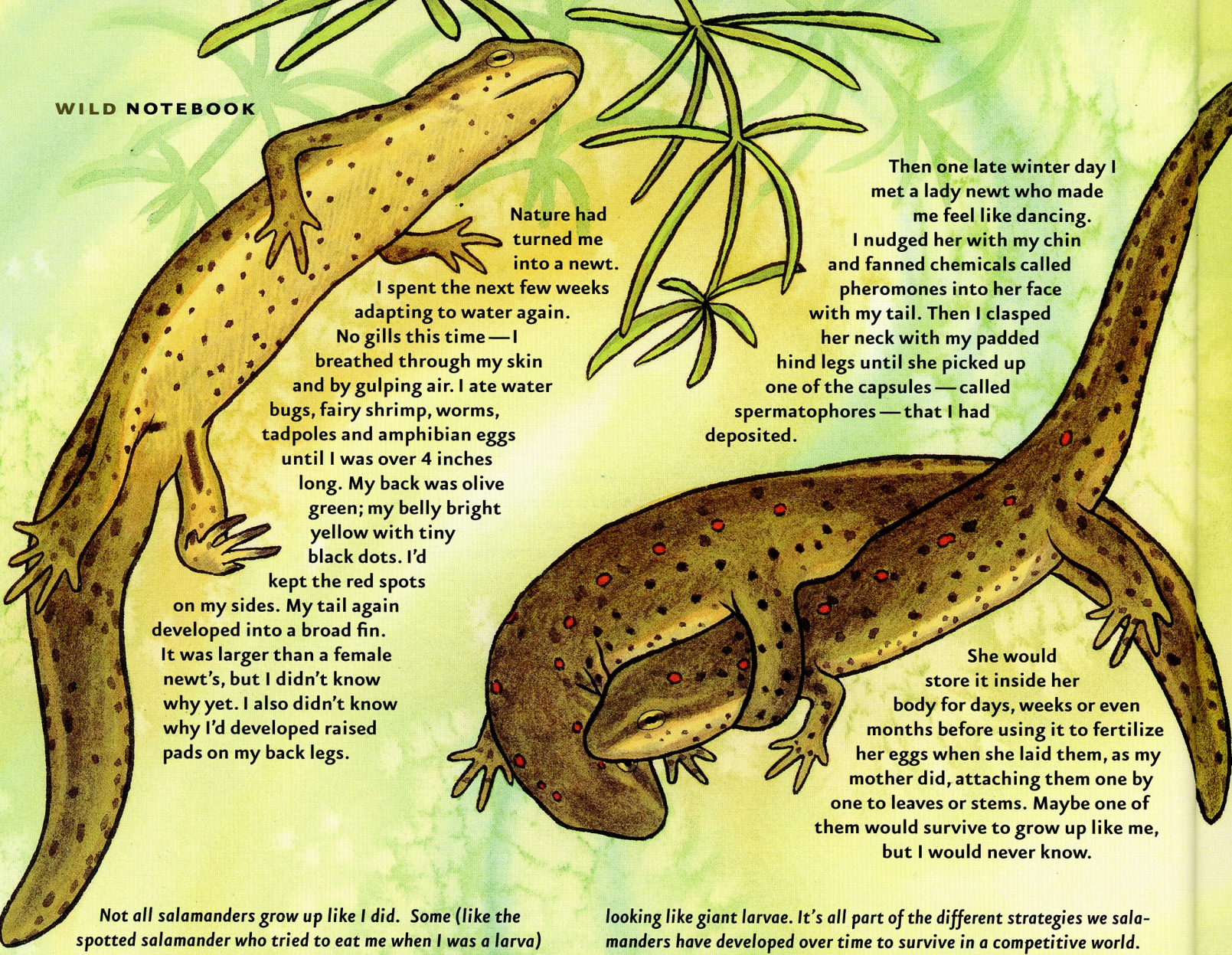
One day a spotted salamander larva, who looked rather like a bigger, hungrier version of me, bit a chunk out of my tail. I was lucky to survive. It's not easy being a newt larva.

I survived three months of this hide-and-seek, always growing and changing. My front legs grew, and my hind legs appeared. My gills began to disappear and lungs developed. My tail fin shrank. My skin thickened and turned orange. The pond was changing, too — getting shallower and warmer. I gulped air from the surface.

One night I left the drying pond, walked up into the woods and burrowed under some leaves. Two nights later it rained. I took a hike, heading away from the pond, up a forested hillside. By morning, I'd traveled a quarter of a mile. I hid under a log before daybreak. A worker termite crawled near and *snap!*, I snagged my first meal on land. Thus began my adolescence.

I lived mostly under logs and leaf litter, but I also patrolled the forest floor — usually at night, but sometimes on damp or cloudy days. (You won't see many salamanders out strolling in broad daylight, but my skin was thicker and drier than that of other species, and I tolerated air and sunlight better. I still needed to stay moist, though.) My skin also produced toxins that made me taste bad, so I had less need to hide. My bright orange color was a warning to anyone hungry enough to try me. I had become an "eft." The forest was my new home, and life was good.

After nearly two years of efthood, I changed again. I'd grown larger. I began to crave water, not knowing why. One rainy night, I took the longest walk of my life — nearly half a mile through the woods. By morning I was back at the pond where I was born. Frogs were chorusing. I slipped into the water.



Nature had turned me into a newt. I spent the next few weeks adapting to water again. No gills this time—I breathed through my skin and by gulping air. I ate water bugs, fairy shrimp, worms, tadpoles and amphibian eggs until I was over 4 inches long. My back was olive green; my belly bright yellow with tiny black dots. I'd kept the red spots on my sides. My tail again developed into a broad fin. It was larger than a female newt's, but I didn't know why yet. I also didn't know why I'd developed raised pads on my back legs.

Then one late winter day I met a lady newt who made me feel like dancing. I nudged her with my chin and fanned chemicals called pheromones into her face with my tail. Then I clasped her neck with my padded hind legs until she picked up one of the capsules—called spermatophores—that I had deposited.

She would store it inside her body for days, weeks or even months before using it to fertilize her eggs when she laid them, as my mother did, attaching them one by one to leaves or stems. Maybe one of them would survive to grow up like me, but I would never know.

Not all salamanders grow up like I did. Some (like the spotted salamander who tried to eat me when I was a larva) start out like me. But after transforming, they live the rest of their lives on land, returning to water only occasionally to breed. Others (like the slimy salamander I met under a log once) live their entire lives on land, spending their larval period inside eggs laid in damp burrows and hatching as fully terrestrial miniatures of their parents. Still others (like the dwarf mudpuppies in the creek a mile from my pond) never leave water, and grow up looking like giant larvae. It's all part of the different strategies we salamanders have developed over time to survive in a competitive world. Even we newts don't all grow up alike. Under certain conditions, we may skip the eft stage altogether, remaining in our ponds until we mature. Some of us spend only a few months as efts—others over three years. And once we become aquatic adults, we may revert to living on land—like a second childhood—if we have to. We newts are perhaps the most adaptable of all salamanders.

Get Outside

Want to see the likes of me? You're in luck—newts are found all over North Carolina. You'd do best to find an ephemeral pond—one that holds water only part of the time. But I can also live in permanent water, if there's enough vegetation to hide in. Beaver swamps, seepage pools, borrow pits and some farm ponds are all good places to find me. If the water's clear, you might see me swimming or floating near the surface. A dipnet or seine may give you a better chance of finding both larvae and adult newts. Look for efts under logs in woods near wetlands. You might also see us out walking on cool, damp days or crossing roads on rainy nights.

Read and Find Out

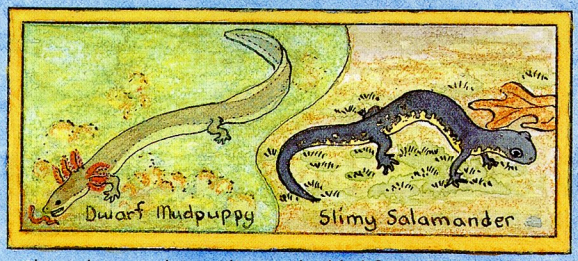
- "Red-spotted Newt" by Doris Gove, Atheneum, 1994.
- "A Salamander's Life" by John Himmelman, Scholastic Library Publishing, 1998.

In *Wildlife in North Carolina:*

- "Back to the Pond" by Lawrence S. Earley, December 1991.
- "Being Amphibian" by Lawrence S. Earley, October 1997.

Find out more about Project WILD Workshops and literature at the Wildlife Commission's Web site at www.ncwildlife.org.

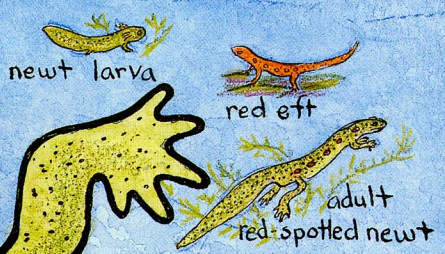
An Adaptable Amphibian . . . a red-spotted newt sculpture

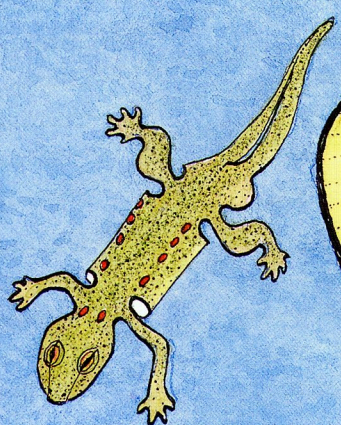


The red-spotted newt lives a double life, aquatic and terrestrial. But not all salamanders live both in water and on land. The dwarf mudpuppy is entirely aquatic, and the slimy salamander is terrestrial.

1) Cut out newt.
2) Crease (or fold) tail section in half along the · · · line.
3) Cut blue area away from tail.
4) Fold down along the · · · lines (from eyes to nostrils) tucking both triangles under snout.
5) Tape in place underneath.
6) Curl sides under and glue belly shut.

crease along this line





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